

Alves' Appurtenances: Realism as Doctrine and as Imperative

Eça de Queirós, *Alves & Co. and Other Stories.*

Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. Sawtry, Cambis: Dedalus

Books, 2012. ISBN: 9781903517895.

Conall Cash

The critiques of realism in literature, and in the other arts, are familiar. Aesthetic claims to realism as a direct, true representation of reality seek to efface the ineluctable, specific material properties of the medium—this is the charge of aesthetic modernism. Realism is enunciated from a specifically bourgeois class perspective, which denies “reality” to those contradictions endemic to social life that are invisible to this perspective and which, in becoming visible, would threaten to undermine it—this is the charge of certain Marxisms. Realism presumes a basic, centred rationality of the artist able to objectively and passively represent what is external to this individual, when in actuality the structure of subjectivity is deeply fractured, contradictory and decentred, and does not permit any such unmediated access to its outside—this is the charge of psychoanalysis. Realism naively imagines that there is such a thing as a real world prior to and separate from mediation altogether, when what the hyper-mediated and technologised nature of contemporary life reveals is that there is not and probably never was any such real world distinct from the various modes of its mediated apprehension—this is the charge of postmodernism.

These critiques have themselves become naturalised over time, to the extent that they greatly pre-condition the reception of nominally realist literature today. And while these perspectives have taught us much about the complex and contested representational capacity of art, it remains unclear how much their critiques of realism have captured of what the major nineteenth-century realists were actually doing. At its worst, the critique of realism imposes a straw man figure of a realist author who naively imagines that their language is entirely transparent, providing a direct window onto “reality” as such. There is also a political dimension to anti-realism which seems open to question, at least in the received form it has taken in the present. The critiques of aesthetic realism that may once have had some emancipatory political function now come to us as ossified normative assertions of the impossibility of art’s having any capacity to represent reality or to produce positive knowledge.

While this observation by no means negates the significance of the critiques of realism at the point of their inception, it should at least demonstrate that even such demystificatory assertions must themselves be demystified, and that anti-realism, once it takes on the form of a doctrine is ultimately no more neutral, no less ideological, than realism itself.¹ This awareness of the historical specificity and ideological limitations of the various critiques of realism should also encourage us to look again at the works of aesthetic realism at its point of greatest cultural significance—in the nineteenth-century novel—in the hope that these works may show us something more than the negative stereotypes which later critiques of the form have cemented in our imaginations.

The Advent of Realism

In this context, the works of the great Portuguese novelist, José Maria de Eça de Queirós, many of which have been translated into English in recent years by Margaret Jull Costa, prove illuminating. The greatness of Eça, which he shares with that other master of Lusophone nineteenth-century literature, Brazil’s Machado de Assis, has much to do with the relatively peripheral status of his native country with respect to the cultural centres of both aesthetic and political development and upheaval of the period, of which France—or more specifically, Paris—is the “capital,” to follow Walter Benjamin’s famous formulation. The canonical works of literary realism, penned by the likes of Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal and Zola, are unsurprisingly the products of a society undergoing a process of cultural revolution, in which the old, archaic ways of perceiving the world associated with the *ancien régime* have to be uprooted and replaced by new subjective modes

of perception and desire, which the realist form of literature not only represents, but actively fosters in its readers.² As the order of an apparently permanent rigidity of aristocratic power endowed by God and maintained by uninterrupted bloodlines is ruthlessly dismantled and replaced by a bourgeois society in which money—that great demysticator of feudal social relations—becomes the basic organising principle, so does literary form begin to dissolve the fixed order and rules of representation proper to earlier generic modes, replacing them with that great literary genre of modernity, the novel.

The novel promises the representability of all things, refusing the hierarchies that have governed earlier forms of literature—the novel as form embodies the radical equality and the undermining of tradition that are promised by bourgeois society itself. Realism as a specific mode of novel-writing would then seem to be the form's natural culmination, ferreting out the lingering remnants of romanticism (present in the word for "novel" itself—*roman* or *romanzo*—in many European languages) and of the Gothic, those genres or modes which privilege the irrational and run against the currents of Enlightenment thought. With the realist novel, all things are in principle knowable and quantifiable, from the private thoughts and feelings of a poor maid to the financial operations of a department store. The novel, from this perspective, achieves its great promise of a radical equality of representation with the advent of realism as the eradication of all remnants of the irrational and the fantastical which had persisted in early novelistic modes.

Of course, it is precisely this conception of realism as an inevitable, progressive overcoming of pre-modern archaisms and falsities that later critics will object to.³ For is not the vision of the world that nineteenth-century realism grants just as mired in a specific, limited, ideological perspective as those of earlier forms of literature? The suppression of the irrational—which in English literature is famously expressed by the parodying of Gothic fiction and the silliness it inspires in its readers in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*—may not so straightforwardly represent a progressive development towards Enlightenment, but may instead be understood as a politically aggressive assertion by the bourgeois class of its own version of rationality, which proclaims the centrality of the ambitious, anti-social individual, denying the possibility of collective identity (as class struggle), and suppressing the irrational or the romantic as that which threatens to question the capitalist assumption that all behaviours, from the individual to the socio-political, are rational, quantifiable, and predictable.

If such formal suppression of these twin enemies of bourgeois consciousness—collective or class-based identity on the one hand, and the

romantic refusal of the absolute rationalisation of existence on the other—characterises the canonical works of French (as well as English) realism, it will be valuable to consider how realism fares in the literatures of societies which have not undergone so radical and so rapid a bourgeois revolution, where the old aristocracy still largely maintains its position and power, and where economic backwardness has not enabled the development of a proletarian class whose size and whose capacity for self-organisation threatens to lead to a further revolution against a newly dominant bourgeoisie. Within such national literatures, the importation of realism as an aesthetic model and as a whole literary way of seeing may be shown to occur in a more haphazard, askew fashion, with the romantic, fatalistic and Gothic elements refusing to lay down and die, but instead mingling in unexpected ways with the new realism. In these contexts, a situation ensues in which the realism imported from elsewhere turns out to be *not realistic enough* for these societies in which the capitalist organisation of social life has not entirely supplanted the older ways, and where the Balzacian narrative of individual avarice and anti-romanticism fails to entirely comprehend the way life is lived here, where the lingering class consciousness of the old aristocracy finds itself intersecting with and gradually accommodating to the encroaching logic of capitalism.⁴

Realism then has to be tinkered with, brought back into positive relation with those other literary genres and those other modes of understanding that the canonical realism had sought to suppress, but which in these different national contexts can in fact express something of social existence that the other approach cannot. In order to stay true to realism as an *imperative*—the imperative to express something of the nature of reality through literature—one has to refuse, or at least problematise, realism as a *doctrine*, a pre-conceived idea of how this expression or representation of reality is to be achieved. Since it can only be a sense of this imperative that can imbue readers today with a sense of realism's contemporaneity, in opposition to a doctrine that pre-determines the form realism may take, it may be that we have much to learn from these writers who responded to the challenge of using and altering the realist literary mode imported from France to understand and represent their own societies, and who often did so by following the imperative at the doctrine's expense.

Eça and Realism

It is here that Eça de Queirós' work can be especially revealing. His major novel, *The Maias* (1888), is one of the great "dialectic of Enlightenment" texts, in which a belief in the rational order of the world and of people's

lives is undercut by a romanticism which sees the ineluctable power of fate in all things, and a disturbed fascination with animality as that which threatens to reveal a horrific emptiness behind human claims to rationality. This novel's great theme, its main characters' great obsession, is the backwardness of Portugal, and the longing to be elsewhere—in Paris, at the forefront of all the cultural and political developments of the time; or in the East, an orientalist fantasy of a vast land untainted by the lethargy endemic to the life-world of the slowly waning aristocracy. It is felt painfully by the young, dilettantish heroes, Carlos da Maia and his friend Joao da Ega, that Portuguese culture is hopelessly behind the times: the taste of modernity the Portuguese have had only leads them to produce outrageously inappropriate and distasteful imitations, embarrassingly revealing their failure to be truly modern. Ega demonstrates this to Carlos near the end of the novel, when the two men, slightly older now, are walking the streets of Lisbon and observing the attire of the young men around them.

The shape of those boots explained everything about contemporary Portugal. It showed how things really were. Having abandoned the ways of the old King, ways that had suited it very well, poor wretched Portugal had decided to become modern, and, lacking the originality, energy, and character to create a style and fashion of its own, it had imported models from abroad—models of ideas, trousers, customs, laws, art, cuisine. However, since it had no sense of proportion, and was, at the same time, dominated by an impatient desire to appear very modern and very civilised, all these models were immediately exaggerated and twisted and distorted into caricatures. The original model for the boot, which had come from abroad, was slightly narrow in the toe, and so the local Portuguese dandy had made it narrower still and as sharp as the point of a needle. Writers, for their part, read the precise chiselled style of a Goncourt or a Verlaine and immediately tortured and mangled their own poor sentences until they descended into the crazed or the burlesque.⁵

This warped craziness of the Portuguese effort to attain modernity is reflected in the unfolding of the novel's plot, as the realist narrative of society gatherings, failed literary ambitions, political debates and disappointing romances is shockingly overturned by the eruption of a darkly fatalistic twist, in the form of the revelation that Carlos and his beloved fiancée Maria Eduarda are long-lost siblings, separated in their infancy and brought back together by the astonishing contingency of circumstance. The preposterousness of this plot development serves Eça's great theme of the backwardness and provincialism of Portugal, showing it to be a country whose

affluent class is small enough that this kind of coincidence is shockingly not so implausible, and showing that even the most sophisticated Portuguese turn out to be hopelessly backward and uncivilised in the end.⁶ But it also offers a broader, ironic critique of the limits and the contradictions of the Enlightenment project's effort to suppress the irrational, and as such it questions the very foundations of realism as a novelistic mode. The supreme irony, of course, is that with this novel about the failure of Portuguese culture to achieve anything truly comparable to the great works of European modernity, Eça has himself written precisely that great work, in which his masterful disordering of the literary form gives shape to a specific social reality, a specific cultural situation. As Roberto Schwarz has argued about Machado de Assis, so too with Eça is the element of anti-realism he introduces precisely that which allows his great novel to achieve a deeper realism.⁷

“The Things Themselves”

The most recently published of Jull Costa's translations of Eça is *Alves & Co.*, a novella unpublished during the author's lifetime but probably written in the early 1880s, which appears in this volume alongside six short stories from different periods in Eça's career. The novella (previously translated into English as *The Yellow Sofa*), different though it is from *The Maias* in length, in tone (*Alves* is essentially comic, whereas *The Maias* could best be called tragicomic), and in the social milieu it represents (not the aristocracy, but the Lisbon bourgeoisie), nonetheless has much in common with that other work, in the awareness it shows of the ways that earlier modes of experience are eroded under capitalism, which reveals the naked economic motivations behind all nobler things, and in its attention to a certain lingering romanticism in Portuguese culture as that which resists quantification or commodification, and yet which ultimately finds itself under threat of being co-opted.

Here, the failed romantic is one Godofredo Alves, head of a small import-export business which ships goods between Portugal and Africa—as with Eça's other novels, the spectre of colonialism haunts this text.⁸ When we meet Godofredo he is fondly contemplating the romantic adventures of his younger assistant, Machado, who has disappeared from the office unexpectedly on what Godofredo surmises is an amorous rendezvous. Yet Alves's romanticism is lightly mocked already from these opening pages, as Eça's narration demonstrates the extent to which it is a commodified sentiment, cultivated by the reading of too many romantic novels.

He read a lot of novels. Grand actions and grand passions excited

him. He occasionally felt that he was made for heroism, for tragedy. But these were dim, ill-defined feelings that stirred only rarely in the depths of the heart in which he kept them imprisoned. He was particularly fascinated by romantic passions, not that he himself had ever considered tasting either their honey or their gall; he was a good husband and he loved his wife Lulu, but he did enjoy seeing such passions enacted on the stage or described in books. And he felt intrigued by the romance he sensed was taking place right there in his office; it was as if the faint perfume of romance emanating from Machado made the packages and the paperwork more interesting.⁹

This sense of the romantic as a pleasant adornment to the safe familiarity of bourgeois existence will blow up in Alves' face just a few pages further on, when he decides to surprise his dear Lulu by arriving home early from work on this, their wedding anniversary and her birthday. One doesn't read *Eça* for the brilliant subtlety of his plot twists—any attentive reader will have figured out the incest secret in *The Maias* a couple of hundred pages before it is finally revealed, yet without this in any way diminishing from the astonishing power of the revelatory scene when it does occur. So when the expected thing happens, and Alves comes home to find his Lulu in a tender embrace with Machado, it would be unwise to imagine oneself to be too clever for the book in light of the predictability of this narrative development. For, having played this initial joke at his hero's expense, *Eça* will follow the thread that he is really concerned with, going on to document with great sensitivity the ways in which Alves' bourgeois consciousness reacts to this catastrophe, and how his romantic, chivalrous side battles with and inevitably loses out to the respectable, conservative pose of the businessman.

From the opening lines of the novella, the reader has been taught to see Alves' world through the objects with which he surrounds himself, beginning with the green baize door to his office which keeps out noise, and the watch he wears "attached to his white waistcoat by a chain of braided hair," which he takes out after he hears the clock on his bookkeeper's wall strike two, to check that it really is so late as that. This fussy bourgeois habit of trusting one's own instruments above others—as if his watch is a more reliable time-teller than a neighbour's clock—already marks Alves out as a figure of gentle ridicule. But his imprisonment by the objects and appurtenances that define his social existence will be more sharply demonstrated as the text develops following the discovery of Lulu and Machado's affair, beginning at the moment when Alves runs down the hall in search of his colleague, after the younger man has fled the scene. Earlier, when entering his building on the way home from work, Alves had been climbing the stairs

leading up to his and Lulu's apartment, reflecting upon the carpeting that he paid for:

[H]e had, at Lulu's request, paid to have the stairs carpeted. And he was glad now that he had, because it was always a pleasure, whenever he went into the house, to feel the carpet beneath his feet and see it rolling away up the stairs, giving the place a sense of solid comfort. It somehow boosted his self-esteem. (22)

Two pages further on, after his wife's lover has fled, Alves bursts out into the landing at the top of these same stairs in search of him:

He ran to the landing, where, before him, beneath the glare from the skylight, lay the deserted stairs, with their smug air of decency. (24)¹⁰

And then, after ordering his wife out of the house, and amid threats to kill Machado, he begins to restore his professional composure in order to go back out into the world of business, and walks down these stairs once more:

He took the remaining stairs four at a time, then, once at the bottom, and as if under the influence of the staircase's grave air of decency, he tried to calm himself, buttoned up his frock coat, ran his hands over his face, and prepared to walk past his neighbours with his customary aplomb, thus assuring him of their continued esteem and respect. (30)

From identifying the carpeted stairs with the solidity of his existence as a successful businessman with a loving wife, to a disgusted sense that the very ground at his feet is dissolving when he gazes on these stairs and their false "air of decency" once the imagined domestic bliss has crumbled away, to a final effort to restore his composure, to become again, in the public eye, the man who paid for these carpeted stairs, the decent man of taste who commands respect, and who must do so by appealing not to anything within himself, but to the objects he has bought and surrounded himself with—in this brief passage, we find the overall development of Alves' story prefigured.¹¹

The significance that the European bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century attached to its appurtenances, those possessions which give value to the individual's life in a world increasingly deprived of meaning, has been noted most insightfully by Walter Benjamin, whose lines on this point serve as a great complement to Eça's novella:

Since the days of Louis Philippe, the bourgeoisie has endeavoured

to compensate itself for the fact that private life leaves no traces in the big city. It seeks such compensation within its four walls—as if it were striving, as a matter of honour, to prevent the traces, if not of its days on earth then at least of its possessions and requisites of daily life, from disappearing forever. The bourgeoisie unabashedly makes impressions of a host of objects. For slippers and pocket watches, thermometers and egg cups, cutlery and umbrellas, it tries to get covers and cases. It prefers velvet and plush covers, which preserve the impression of every touch. For the Makart style, the style of the end of the Second Empire, a dwelling becomes a kind of casing. This style views it as a case for a person and embeds him in it, together with all his appurtenances, tending his traces as nature tends dead fauna embedded in granite. One must note that there are two sides to this process. The real or sentimental value of the objects thus preserved is emphasised. They are removed from the profane gaze of nonowners; in particular, their outlines are blurred in a characteristic way. It is no accident that resistance to controls, something that becomes second nature to asocial persons, displays a resurgence in the propertied bourgeoisie. ... Since the French Revolution, an extensive network of controls has been bringing bourgeois life ever more tightly into its meshes. The numbering of houses in the big cities may be used to document the progressive standardisation. Napoleon's administration had made such numbering obligatory for Paris in 1805. In proletarian neighbourhoods, to be sure, this simple police measure had encountered resistance. As late as 1864, the following was reported about Saint-Antoine, the carpenters' neighbourhood: "If one asks an inhabitant of this suburb what his address is, he will always give the name of his house and not its cold, official number." In the long run, of course, such resistance was of no avail against the government's effort to establish a multifarious web of registrations—a means of compensating for the elimination of traces that takes place when people disappear into the masses of the big cities.¹²

What *Alves & Co.* brilliantly shows is what happens to such a bourgeois individual, who has sought in just this way to compensate for the anonymity of urban life—its effacement of the traces of individual existence—through encasing himself in a world of possessions upon which such traces may be left, possessions which are themselves encased, covered in protective surfaces (the carpeting of the stairs) or finished off with adornments (the chain of braided hair which attaches the watch to Alves' waistcoat). The novella shows what happens to this man when that life of compensatory meaning

he has built up around him begins to crumble, and further shows his willingness to renounce all traditional values in order to get it back. If the modernity brought about by the rise of the bourgeoisie and the renunciation of understandings of the permanent order of existence produces a life-world in which, in Marx and Engels' famous words, "all that is solid melts into air,"¹³ so will the individual bourgeois inevitably experience much of this unease, this nausea, of a world without solid foundation, which has been covered over by the gloss of the commodity as that which allows meaning to be restored within the bounds of private existence. This unease will be felt at those moments when such covering starts to peel off, when the stability granted by these private appurtenances begins to liquify in turn, revealing behind it the coldness of the organised world as "a multifarious web of registrations," in which the subject is simultaneously anonymous, de-individualised, marked as a number on a census without interior or social history, and, at the same time, entirely accessible, without privacy, a known quantity for whenever the state apparatus needs to locate and contain him or her. Within decades of Benjamin's account of these nineteenth-century developments, the extent to which the individual will have been brought to this state of simultaneous anonymity (as a person amongst other people) and complete accessibility (as a piece of information available to official records, government and police) will reach the state where surveillance starts to look like the only form of romance left in the world, as Thomas Pynchon has Federal prosecutor Brock Vond state in his great novel of the 1980s, *Vineland*:

There was no way back to the person she'd been—beyond any way to clear it that she had set up Weed's murder and was in the federal law-enforcement files now and forever, shared with every last amateur cop groupie in the land, listed as a species her parents had taught her to despise—a Cooperative Person.

"It's what you want, isn't it?" the dark apparition of Brock Vond questioned her from continental distance. "'Forever,' isn't that supposed to be as romantic as it gets? Well, we can provide you with Forever, no sweat. What DOJ promises, we deliver."¹⁴

The liquification of Alves' sense of himself and his place in the world only deepens as subsequent events unfold. First, as he makes embarrassing efforts to play the honourable man, attempting to organise a duel with his rival, he continues to oscillate between a feeling that his possessions are providing him with strength, and the sense that they are imprisoning him, even judging him for his hopeless lack of decorum. Upon deciding on the plan he aims to present to Machado, Alves awaits with anxiety the mo-

ment at which their meeting is to take place. Again, the metamorphoses in Alves' perception of the objects around him occur in three steps.

Drawing on his gloves, he paced nervously, almost feverishly, back and forth between window and door, and it seemed to him that the ground on which he walked was so soft that it gave beneath his feet. (51)

After reaching the office he once shared with the younger man, whose arrival for the fateful meeting he now awaits, Alves' ire starts to grow:

A sudden change of mood came over him. Seeing that furniture, the two companionable desks side by side, and, remembering their years of friendship and trust, he was filled with a furious rage against Machado. And the things themselves accompanied him in his anger. Yes, Machado was a villain who properly deserved death. And every chair, the very walls, all imbued with the same commercial honesty as the room itself, silently condemned Machado for his betrayal. (52)

But then, when Alves announces his peculiar plan to Machado, and the words die into embarrassing silence, the room itself and this same furniture stand in judgement at his ineptitude:

"The only way to make amends is for one of us to die. A duel would be absurd. We must draw lots as to which of us should kill himself."

These dread words, once spoken, struck him as strange and incoherent; even the furniture seemed to reject them. (54)

Alves' character allegorises Portuguese society inasmuch as he is, on the one hand, a failed romantic, unable to live in the honourable, noble manner of an aristocrat who would always know the proper way to do things "in affairs of this sort," following the protocol set down by generations of patriarchal heritage, and in that he is equally unsuccessful as a modern individual, too concerned about tender feelings and a misdirected sense of chivalry to ever make it as an Eugène de Rastignac. The objects with which he surrounds himself begin to make fun of him for these failures, especially as his life becomes more and more miserable in the absence of his wife from their home and of his young colleague from the office, and as he finds himself alone with these objects that he can barely use without assistance.

Our hero's reclamation of his place in the world inevitably occurs, then, not through any dashing act of violence, but in a gradual return to the old ways, the old comforts, allowing the bourgeois sense of decorum to conquer the desire to avenge himself in the traditional manner, which he has in

any case already bungled with his ridiculed plan of the drawing of lots. After the further frustration of seeing his wife's father fritter away the allowance Alves has granted to her during their separation, and after the misery of living out a bachelor's existence, with servants who have grown increasingly lazy in the absence of their former mistress (knowing that the master can't fire them for fear that they would spread gossip about the separation to outsiders), Alves is desperate to have his Lulu back, and to forgive her for her wrongdoings. His honour is still great enough, however, to prevent him from asking her to return, and so he waits unbearably for an opportunity to run into her on the street. (Like the story of Carlos and Maria, this is another narrative incident that points towards Eça's great theme of Portuguese provincialism, of Lisbon as little more than a glorified small town.) When the meeting finally does take place, upon Alves seeing Lulu and her sister on the street not far from his house, a reconciliation is arrived at in a flurry, by way of yet another discussion of household objects:

"Things at home haven't been going well either. Margarida [the maid] has grown very slovenly. And there was something I wanted to ask you. How on earth does one light that reading lamp? I've tried everything."

She laughed, and so did Teresa. Realising that, from that moment on, she was once more Godofredo's wife, Ludovina said:

"If you like, I can come and show Margarida what to do." (88)

And so, with this restoration, "life flow[s] on in its usual easy, banal way" (98), with things restored to their proper place and function. The lives of our characters continue in their familiar ways, freed from the dark grandeur of death that had vaguely haunted the affair of the aborted duel and the proposed suicide pact. Eça seems here to be making a point that will again be made in *The Maias*, regarding changing attitudes towards death. In that novel, Carlos' disastrous love affair with Maria echoes the misery that had befallen his own father, Pedro, whose wife had abandoned him for an Italian lover, leaving the baby Carlos behind (while taking with her the daughter who will grow up to become Carlos' mistress). Pedro shoots himself and leaves the baby to be raised by the grandfather. When Carlos, decades later, endures the far greater indignity of discovering his own guilt of incest, he suffers greatly, even contemplating suicide for a time, but finally settles for an idle life of travel and occasional debauchery, a withdrawal from the world and from the possibility of romantic happiness which nonetheless does not prevent him from enjoying the sensual pleasures of life as he lives on into middle age. So too with Alves and the rivalry that finally gets patched up after a little while—he and Machado go back to being

great friends, and no more is said about the incident—are we invited to read a decline in the grandeur of death, and a niggling sense that honour doesn't amount to much, that the beliefs upon which such codes were founded, whether in the afterlife or in the importance of maintaining the respectability of the family name (at a time when, as Benjamin's example above indicated, houses bore names referring to their historical owners, rather than "cold, official numbers"), are not so pertinent, not so present in a world where the only meaning to be made is a private one, divorced from any sense of the historical or the collective, and where death becomes an impossible thought, an absolute outside, its connection to any purpose or continuity having been violently severed.¹⁵ The relationship between modernity and the "denial of death" has been explored elsewhere;¹⁶ *Alves & Co.* stands as one such exploration, as the diagnosis of a character who, like Nietzsche's "last man," "has [their] little pleasure for the day and [their] little pleasure for the night: but [they] respect health."¹⁷

Realism and Representability

One of the great achievements of *Alves & Co.* is Eça's capacity to capture the jumps in Alves' thoughts as they are in motion, often by way of a comic descent from a noble sentiment to a selfish wish not to have to disturb his comfortable existence too much. This attribute, of which the case of the carpeted stairway provided an example, places Eça's brand of realism in the company of much modernist literature—there is something of Leopold Bloom in Godofredo Alves, and Eça's representations of the latter's thoughts attain on occasion a Joycean quality. What is most thrilling here is the way in which the contingencies of daily experience and the stream of thoughts with which the individual responds to them are made to interpenetrate within the text, producing a work which truly does hold to that novelistic promise of the representability of all things, and the refusal of hierarchies. This condition of modern art will be thematised as such in the first of the subsequent stories from other periods in Eça's career published in this volume, "A Lyric Poet," in which the eponymous character laments the fact that he never has the time or the freedom to compose his beautiful poems, due to the demands of his job as a waiter at a London hotel:

Sometimes, while leaning in a window, napkin over his arm, Korrissosso would be busy writing an elegy filled with moonlight, the white robes of pale virgins, celestial horizons, the flowers of a grieving soul... Ah, he was happy then, up there in the poetic heavens, on the blue plains of dreams, galloping from star to star... Then, suddenly, a coarse, hungry voice would call out:

“Beef and potatoes!”

And those winged fantasies would scatter like doves! (113)

This is the condition, the exigency, of modern literature itself, to represent not just the noble things which are the accepted objects of poetic discourse (the moonlight, the white robes of pale virgins), but to also represent all those other things that get in the way of such beauties: the banal, inescapably present, fleshly things of everyday life, the coarse and hungry voice, the beef and potatoes.¹⁸ The story thematises this situation brilliantly by way of its titular character, a poet working as a hotel waiter, with the hotel functioning as a place where people from all walks of life can unexpectedly encounter each other, where the rules that govern ordinary existence are suspended or confused, and where one starts to see things differently, to encounter shards of experience that would normally have been kept outside the bounds of one’s conception of “reality,” including for instance the strange figure of this long-haired servant from the East who turns out to have an astonishing literary talent. This randomness of the encounter that the space of the hotel makes possible is rendered most apparent in the scene which leads the story’s narrator—a guest whose curiosity about the mysterious Korriscosso has been piqued by the waiter’s distracted behaviour when serving his dinner—into an unexpected encounter with the young poet, who then proceeds to tell him his life story. This encounter occurs only because the narrator gets lost walking up to his room, and accidentally wanders into the servants’ quarters. It is, fittingly, in this servants’ hall, where the rooms do not bear “cold” numbers (to recall Benjamin’s account) but rather the names of their inhabitants, and where the magic of the contingency of a possible encounter still hovers in the air, that our narrator meets the mysterious Korriscosso and hears the story of the disappointing life that has led this talented poet to need to make his living as a hotel servant.

This definition of a properly modern literature as one in which all things become representable enables one to conceive of the artistic schools commonly divided between the camps of “realism” and “modernism” as part of the same tendency (my suggestion above of the Joyceanness of Eça’s narration was also intended to imply this point). This has been the argument of Jacques Rancière (even if he will wish to refuse the notion of “modernity” altogether) in work that has received considerable attention in recent years, with his notion of the aesthetic regime of art as distinct from the earlier, representative or mimetic “regime”:

The leap outside of *mimesis* is by no means the refusal of figurative representation. Furthermore, its inaugural moment has often been

called *realism*, which does not in any way mean the valorization of resemblance but rather the destruction of the structures within which it functioned. Thus, novelistic realism is first of all the reversal of the hierarchies of representation (the primacy of the narrative over the descriptive or the hierarchy of subject matter) and the adoption of a fragmented or proximate mode of focalization, which imposes raw presence to the detriment of the rational sequences of the story.¹⁹

In another story, "The Treasure," Eça takes this conception of the representability of all things to an extreme, by having the narration carry on even after all the human characters have died:

Night fell. Two rooks from the cawing flock beyond the brambles further off had already alighted on Guanes' corpse. Meanwhile, the spring, still singing, continued to wash the other dead man clean. And half-buried in the dark grass, Rui's entire face had turned black. A single tiny star glimmered in the sky. (141)

There is nothing in principle to stop the narration from going on indefinitely in this fashion to depict the physical world in all its specificity, without subordinating it to the logic of a human drama.

Yet, as the preceding account of Eça's work as borne out of a social context not entirely ready to have done with older conceptions of story and ordered discourse has suggested, his writings cannot so easily be assimilated to a mode of literature in which "the rational sequences of the story" have been subdued in favour of the "impos[ition of] raw presence." This story itself demonstrates the point, for the deaths of the three characters occur only by way of a quite traditional folktale narrative, adapted, in fact, from Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale" (Eça, like his character Afonso da Maia, was a great Anglophile, and spent much of his diplomatic career based in England²⁰), "which was itself," Jull Costa points out in her introduction, "based on an Oriental folk-tale" (11). The story involves three men who discover a treasure chest in a forest, each attempting to claim all of the treasure for himself by killing the others, until finally they are all dead and the treasure remains in the forest untouched. What Eça presents, both here and in the longer works, is not exactly a privileging of the autonomy of aesthetic representation over the traditional patterns and codes of storytelling, but a curious interpenetration of the two, in which the whole history of literature can be called upon to provide a kind of frame or basis for the unfolding of the text, into which are inserted elements of this non-narrative contingency of "raw presence," the modern or realist form of narration intersecting with the traditional storytelling one, each threatening to undermine the other (as the fatalistic plot of *The Maias* threatens to undermine the mod-

ern, realist narrative), without either finally being cancelled out.

The Contemporaneity of the Realist Imperative

What these observations intend to point out is that Eça is not simply an interesting anomaly, but that the very peripheral position from which he writes—Portugal, rather than a political and cultural centre like France or England—provides considerable insights into this whole literary history itself, which comprises the shifts between and amongst the various periods demarcated as “romanticism,” “realism” and “modernism.” Michael Wood has suggested that “Eça de Queirós’s chief question, perhaps, is whether realism is possible in Portugal, in literature or anything else”; what I would wish to add is that it is this questioning of realism’s possibility in the Portuguese context which enables a questioning of realism altogether as a mode of representation.²¹ The fact that realism is *in question* for a Portuguese author, the fact that it does not feel “natural” or straightforwardly coincident with the real within the Portuguese context, is what leads him to ponder the question of realism as such. The very marginal or peripheral status from which the author writes leads him to pose fundamental questions of the aesthetic instrument he uses, because of its very foreignness to him and his national situation, which it would never occur to the more canonical authors of the realist tradition to ask. In Eça, in effect, one finds at work two realisms. One is the aesthetic ideology of the bourgeois cultural revolution imported largely from France (the realist doctrine). The other is an operation or method of interruption which works to disrupt the ordered structure of whatever aesthetic paradigm is in force, even if that paradigm is “realism” itself—this is the realist imperative. In this sense the fatalism of *The Maias* is just as much an affirmation of realism as are the narratives of “A Lyric Poet” and “The Treasure” with their interruptions of traditional literary forms by way of the “impos[ition of] raw presence to the detriment of the rational sequences of the story,” in Rancière’s words.

This notion of realism as an interruptive method, in which one dares to pose the question of the real, to alienate whatever discourse is in play from the assumption that it has access to, that it speaks, “the real”—it is this that allows realism a currency in the context of all literary periods and aesthetic debates, as something more than an isolated genre or ideology. Even the postmodern denial of the real and of the possibility of its being accessed by thought is itself a statement of a certain kind of doctrinal realism, an assertion of a doxa, of a prescribed way of the world that one cannot think beyond. And so the realist imperative, as an interruption of all such doctrinal realisms, can be as much in effect in this context as in that of the realist cri-

tique of romanticism. What is at stake, ultimately, is a distinction once formulated by Fredric Jameson, between

the realism of other people—something codified from the outside in the handbooks of 19th-century literature (or of early 20th-century film)—and those punctual moments in which—in a generally stylized and modernized cultural climate—we ourselves occasionally learn again, by experience, what genuine realism “really” is.²²

To read Eça de Queirós' works—and none moreso than those collected in this new volume—is to be engaged at every moment in this tension between the two realisms, and to feel the power that these texts continue to hold in the present at the moments in them when the realist imperative lurches to the surface to interrupt and displace the ordered discourse of the realist doctrine.

Cornell University
 cjc336@cornell.edu

NOTES

- ¹ One of the more significant critical essays on literary realism is Roland Barthes' "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 141–48. While Barthes' writings on realism have often been cited as influences upon the more virulent attacks on realism of Althusserian critics working in literary and film criticism (see note 3 below), Barthes' own position is in fact a far more nuanced one, which however it will not be possible to go into here.
- ² This argument that realism served an ideological purpose of training its readers to perceive the world in a new way, demystified of the meanings and myths that ordered it under feudalism, is set out by Fredric Jameson in his essay, "The Realist Floor-Plan," in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 373–83.
- ³ Some of the fiercest polemics against the imposition of the canonised realist novel as an aesthetic standard and as a fixed, perfected instrument for "representing reality" may be found in Alain Robbe-Grillet's collection of essays, *For A New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965). See in particular the essay "On Several Obsolete Notions." One can of course also think of the deconstructionist critique of the so-called "referential illusion," in essays by Michael Riffaterre, Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller and others, which stresses language's inability to refer to its "outside," or in other words the essential "intertextuality" of literary language, which also directs its polemics against notions of realism. See for example Riffaterre, "Interpretation and Undecidability," *New Literary History* 12, no. 2 (1981): 227–42. Within a certain, Althusserian strain of Marxism,

realism has also been attacked as an inherently conservative form which passes itself off as natural, just as Althusser writes of ideology—Colin MacCabe has written for example that in the realist text “we are persuaded that language and form have disappeared” (MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* [London: Macmillan, 1979], 20). This position had its strongest effects upon film theory, as practiced by journals like *Cahiers du cinéma* in France and *Screen* in the UK in the 1970s. For a helpful and critical overview of these theoretical debates over realism, see Dougal McNeill, *Forecasts of the Past: Globalisation, History, Realism, Utopia* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 36–45.

- ⁴ Numerous other historical and national contexts may be suggested in which this kind of deformation and reformation of a received order or doctrine of realism gets played out, perhaps the most pertinent being that school of modern Latin American literature sometimes controversially labelled magic realism. Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s remarks on this topic in a book of interviews by Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, *The Fragrance of Guava* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), provide an interesting complement to some of the arguments I put forward in this article.
- ⁵ Eça de Queirós, *The Maias: Episode from Romantic Life*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2007), 612.
- ⁶ The function of the incest plot as an allegory for social decadence has a rich legacy in nineteenth-century literature, most notably in Zola’s *La Curée*. It is a theme which persists in numerous works of Eça, and is explored most interestingly in Carmo Ponte’s essay, “Incest and the Female Character in Eça de Queirós’ *A Tragédia da Rua das Flores*,” *Portuguese Studies* 7 (January, 1991): 78–85. See also Terryl L. Givens, “Os Maias: Incest, Dilettantes, and the Ethics of Realism,” *Hispanofila* 100 (September, 1990): 53–65. One useful consideration of the multiple functions of the incest plot across this period in European literature is provided by Stefani Engelstein, “Sibling Incest and Cultural Voyeurism in Günderode’s *Udohla* and Thomas Mann’s *Wälsungenblut*,” *The German Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (Summer, 2004): 278–299.
- ⁷ Roberto Schwarz, “A Brazilian Breakthrough.” *New Left Review* 36 (Nov–Dec 2005): 91–107. See also my article on Schwarz, “The Tension of Rationality,” *Colloquy* 25 (2013): 58–88.
- ⁸ Perry Anderson’s three-part essay, “Portugal and the End of Ultra-Colonialism,” *New Left Review* 1/15, 16, 17 (1962), remains a crucial (if dated) reference on the interconnection between Portuguese colonialism and its backward domestic economy.
- ⁹ Eça de Queirós, *Alves & Co. and Other Stories*, 18. Citations henceforth given in-text.
- ¹⁰ It is worth noting that in the original Eça actually writes “*decencia burguesa*,” or “bourgeois decency.” See *Alves & Ca.* (Porto: Livraria Chardron, 1925), 28.
- ¹¹ The fetishisation of private possessions and of interior space in the world of Eça’s novels has been observed by many critics. Estela Vieira develops an intriguing reading of the interior as central to the work of narrative in Eça’s *The Maias* as well as other major works of Spanish and Lusophone literature of the period, in *Interiors and Narrative: The Spatial Poetics of Machado de Assis, Eça de Queirós,*

and *Leopoldo Alas* (Plymouth: Bucknell University Press, 2013). She observes for instance of the crucial scene of revelation of the incest secret that "Ega requires furnishings and adornments to frame and cope with the tragic turn of events" (134).

¹² Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3–94 (quoted passage, 25–26). This discussion also calls to mind Balzac's description of the front doors of old houses in *Eugénie Grandet*:

"Further along the street one notes the doors, studded with huge nails, on which our ancestors recorded the passions of the age in hieroglyphs, once understood in every household, the meaning of which no one will now ever again unravel. In these symbols a Protestant declared his faith, or a Leaguer cursed Henri IV, or some civic dignitary traced the insignia of his office, celebrating the long-forgotten glory of his temporary high estate as alderman or sheriff. The history of France lies written in these houses." *Eugénie Grandet*, trans. Marion Ayton Crawford (Harmondsworth, 1977), 34.

¹³ "The Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 476.

¹⁴ Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Vintage, 1990), 280.

¹⁵ Here it is worth recalling Foucault's remarks on the "privatisation" of death being concomitant with the modern rise of so-called biopower: "Now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its dominion; death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most 'private.'" Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 138.

¹⁶ See, for example, Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1979); Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 47.

¹⁸ A character in another of Eça's novels expresses this sense of the inescapable irritation of the little detail as something like an existential fact of urban modernity:

"What shocked me most of all was his horror of the Crowd, of certain effects of the Crowd, which only he noticed and which he called 'grooves.'

'You won't be aware of them, Zé Fernandes, because you've just come up from the country. But these "grooves" represent the one real inconvenience of Cities! It could be the strong, brazen perfume some woman gives off as she passes and which lodges in your sense of smell and contaminates the air for the rest of the day. It could be a phrase overheard in a group of friends and which reveals a world of deceit or pedantry or stupidity that remains stuck to your soul, like a spatter of mud, reminding you of the vastness of the swamp yet to be traversed. Or, my friend, it could be an individual whose unbearable pretentiousness or bad taste or impertinence or vulgarity or hardness of heart presents you with a vision of such repellent ugliness that you simply cannot shake it off. These grooves, Zé Fernandes, are quite dreadful, but then again, they are the minor miseries one has

to put up with in an otherwise delicious Civilization!” Eça, *The City and the Mountains*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (New York: New Directions, 2008), 35–6.

¹⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*, 34–35 (Paris: La Fabrique-Éditions, 2000); *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 24.

²⁰ See also Eça de Queirós, *Eça’s English Letters*, trans. Alison Aiken and Ann Stevens (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000).

²¹ Wood, “Marvellous Money.” *London Review of Books* 30, no. 1 (January 2008): 13–14.

²² Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 239. For an exhaustive critical account of Jameson’s work on realism (prior to his new *Antinomies of Realism*), see McNeill, *Forecasts of the Past*, 1–32.